



The Times

Groups push for moderate in court

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Staff Writer

In a campaign that promises to intensify in the coming months, several prominent state groups rallied with their political allies yesterday to urge President Bush to tap a moderate U.S. Supreme Court nominee.

Pro-choice groups and others in the Garden State contend they are prepared to fight to make sure the president's next pick for the court, who is widely expected to be a conservative, doesn't threaten civil liberties.

Flanked by advocates at a State House news conference, U.S. Sens. Jon Corzine, D-N.J., and Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., said yesterday the president must pick someone who will uphold a woman's right to choose an abortion.

"We don't need someone who puts their own political agenda before the law," said Corzine, who is also a gubernatorial candidate.

Corzine and Lautenberg said they would like to see a nominee who holds similar values as Sandra Day O'Connor, who recently announced her retirement after serving as the deciding vote in many pivotal cases over years.

Though both senators acknowledged their status in the minority party would make it difficult for them to influence confirmation hearings, they said their party's leadership has vowed to play a significant role in the debate.

"This is a defining moment for democracy," Lautenberg said.

State representatives of the National Organization for Women, Planned Parenthood and other groups joined the two senators at their afternoon press conference.

Suzannah Porter, president of the state's chapter of the National Organization for Women, said a coalition of like-minded state groups is prepared to launch a "rapid-response" education campaign if the president nominates a hard-right conservative.

"It's really crucial that the public understand that it's not just reproductive rights," Porter said, "but a gamut of civil liberties.

Porter said her group held an emergency board meeting over the weekend to map out its strategy, which will include a letter-writing campaign.

Phyllis Kinsler of Planned Parenthood's central Jersey chapter said she knows many people believe O'Connor's departure from the court doesn't yield enough votes to overturn the famous Roe vs. Wade decision that upholds a woman's right to choose an abortion.

Nonetheless, Kinsler said other cases that touch upon a woman's reproductive rights will likely come up before the court in the future.

"People are saying they don't want to overturn Roe, but they have been eating away at Roe," Kinsler said.

Once the president puts forth his nominee, Kinsler said, Planned Parenthood will host events and work to push its agenda.

"This is crucial," she said. "We don't have a spare vote."

But those on the other side of the argument won't be addressing this issue quietly either.

Marie Tasy of N.J. Right to Life said she has already asked her members to write the White House and encourage the president to nominate a conservative justice.

Tasy said yesterday's press conference didn't reflect the views of all New Jersey residents.

"It's an election year ploy," she said, "to get more publicity for the candidate they're supporting and grab some headlines."

Both senators yesterday declined to comment on any specific people who are considered possible nominees, including Hamilton native Samuel A. Alito Jr., who is widely considered to be a strong conservative.

Tasy said she didn't know enough about Alito's record to comment on it.

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